

STUDENT SUCCESS *in* COLLEGE

Promoting Student Success

Creating Conditions So Every Student Can Learn

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Occasional Paper #3

Six Conditions that Matter to Student Success

- I. "Living" Mission and "Lived" Educational Philosophy
- II. Unshakeable Focus on Student Learning
- III. Environments Adapted for Educational Enrichment
- IV. Clear Pathways to Student Success
- V. Improvement-Oriented Ethos
- VI. Shared Responsibility for Educational Quality and Student Success



Accommodating diverse learning styles of students has long been espoused as a principle of good practice in undergraduate education. Much progress has been made during the past two decades in using active, collaborative, and problem-based learning, learning communities, student-faculty research, service learning, internships, and other pedagogical innovations to enrich student learning. Variable time blocks are more common -- from three hours, to all day, to weekends, to six or eight weeks -- to fit the desired outcomes, content, and processes. Peers tutor other students, deepening their own learning in the process. Increasingly sophisticated communication and information technologies provide students access to a broad range of print and visual resources and to an expanded range of human expertise. A wider range of assessment tools document what and how well students are learning. Despite all this activity, at too many schools these and other effective educational practices are underutilized.

The suggestions offered here are drawn in large part from a study of 20 diverse four-year colleges and universities that have higher-than-predicted graduation rates and, through the National Survey of Student Engagement, demonstrated that they have effective practices for fostering success among students of differing abilities and aspirations. These institutions clearly communicate that they value high quality undergraduate teaching and learning. They have developed instructional approaches tailored to a wide range of student learning styles, ensuring that students engage with course content and interact in meaningful ways with faculty and peers, inside and outside the classroom.



**National Survey
of Student Engagement**

1. Teach students through the recruitment and admission process how to take control of their own learning

The application for admission itself can help students begin to understand how to use the college experience to educational advantage by asking them to respond to three questions: What do you want to learn? How do you learn best? What knowledge and competence do you already have pertinent to what you want to learn? These questions also should be presented to individuals and groups during campus visits. Initially, students will be challenged in providing coherent answers. Their responses may not be very thoughtful or sophisticated. But the important thing is to raise the questions, to start students thinking this way right from the beginning.

The Gonzaga Experience Live, or GEL program, is a spring event for prospective students that includes campus tours, academic sessions, a club and organization fair, evening social activities, and a night in a residence hall with a current student. Discussions frequently focus on questions about how to live a moral life—what is good, how one should live. Thus, Gonzaga University signals the importance of such questions long before students arrive on campus. GEL participants receive a glossy publication, *Your Total Self*, which features a series of individual student profiles, such as a student pursuing medical research describing her relationship with her Gonzaga faculty mentor and a

journal entry from another student documenting his semester-long collaboration with peers on a mechanical engineering project. Thus, Gonzaga sends two consistent messages to newcomers: (1) you will have many different opportunities to pursue your educational goals in the context of a Jesuit community, and (2) Gonzaga is a place where students form deep, enduring relationships with their teachers and other students.

2. Use orientation programs and first-year seminars to help students discover their preferred learning approaches and abilities

Among the more widely used self-diagnostic exercises and instruments for this purpose are Kolb's Learning Styles and Adaptive Styles Inventories based on his experiential learning theory. The Myers Briggs Type Inventory (M.B.T.I.), a personality typology, is also used to better understand individual differences. The point is not to put individuals in boxes or to assign labels. Each

person is too complex for any categorization scheme. The goal is for students to become more reflective and thoughtful about how they learn best and to give them some conceptual frameworks for that reflection.

The University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) created University College to help students make the transition. Described as a “hybrid of student and academic affairs,” it coordinates admissions, financial aid, orientation, registrar functions, and academic advising along with learning communities that link two or three courses for the same student cohorts. It operates *University 1301: Seminar in Critical Inquiry*, a three-hour requirement for all first-year students, a course that emphasizes collaboration, teamwork, and active learning. Students are explicitly taught how to learn well and to be interdependent. The course also emphasizes preparation, practice, and group presentations with peer evaluation where all group members receive the same grade.

3. Help faculty members to become familiar with different learning styles and to adapt their pedagogical approaches accordingly

“Motivation is a key to persistence and to learning that lasts. The challenge is to help each person clarify his or her important purposes and then to find, or create, the combination of educational experiences that lead to those desired outcomes.”

This is especially important for faculty members who teach first-year students and large enrollment general education courses. By using one or more of the conceptual frameworks and diagnostic exercises mentioned in the previous section during the first or second class meeting, they can discuss the results with their students and consider how they and their diverse students can

work together more productively. This has the added benefit of helping students understand how to approach their courses and other learning experiences to get the most out of them.

At Fayetteville State University (FSU), the Center for Teaching and Learning gives workshops that help faculty members learn to assess the abilities of individual students. They provide information about students' diverse learning needs. This is important because more than 40% of entering students score low on math and reading readiness exams and need to improve communication skills. Many are the first in their families to go to college, and come from small towns and rural areas where household incomes are less than \$20,000 a year. FSU faculty members do not apologize for these students. Their mantra is to teach the students they have, not those they wish they had. As one faculty member said, “You have to reach them to teach them.” The philosophy is, “We will meet you where you are, but we

will tell you where we want you to go." Many faculty members provide alternate assignments so, for example, students can replace an exam with a paper.

4. Assess students' prior learning from work and life experiences as well as from formal and informal educational activities

Awarding academic credit based on assessing prior learning was initially designed for adults with substantial experiential learning. It may also be applicable for traditional college age students, even those coming directly from high school, who have had varied experiences not represented on their transcripts and who have not systematically reflected on the knowledge and competence gained from those activities. Such assessments are particularly important for first-generation college students and those less advantaged who have had to work to earn money to attend college. The objective is to have them recognize and document their strengths, instead of simply focusing on whatever academic limitations they may have. Focusing on the positive boosts self esteem and provides a platform on which they can build additional strengths and competencies as they take advantage of whatever assistance they may need to perform at the desired levels.

Students at California State University at Monterey Bay (CSUMB) design an Individualized Learning Plan (ILP) to achieve the learning outcomes of the required Freshman-Year Experience Seminar including demonstrated college-level skills in oral and written communication, collaborative learning, and gathering and assessing information in an interdisciplinary, multicultural context. The pedagogical approach is consistent with CSUMB's "assets" educational philosophy which recognizes that students' prior knowledge and experience should be used to foster and deepen subsequent learning. Starting with what students know reinforces the expectation that students are preparing to make a difference in the world and are empowered to effect change. In subsequent years, students update their ILP to respond to their changing educational and professional goals.

5. Strengthen support for individualized major and independent studies or learning contracts

Motivation is a key to persistence and to learning that lasts. The challenge is to help each person clarify his or her important purposes and then to find, or create, the combination of educational experiences that lead to those desired outcomes. During the first two years, prior to choosing or designing a major, independent studies or

learning contracts can be used to explore the areas of knowledge and competence pertinent to particular purposes, be they occupational aspirations, intellectual interests, or social concerns. Those studies can lay the foundation for majors that build on important motives. At The Evergreen State College, Individual Learning Contracts are widely used, and typically include some combination of readings, writing, photography, painting, field studies or research. Though a faculty member provides guidance and feedback, learning goals and the design and structure of the course of study are proposed by the student. Individual Learning Contracts provide students with an opportunity to plan an academic project and work on a one-to-one basis with a faculty member, often meeting. About 10% of Wofford College students conduct an independent study or research project with faculty during each January Interim. The Interim session was adopted to encourage students (as well as the faculty) to do something "out of the ordinary."

6. Provide prompt, detailed, and personalized feedback

Students learn best when the strengths and weaknesses of their products and performances are carefully evaluated and they receive specific suggestions for how to improve their work. Another powerful approach is to spell out performance criteria and to have learning teams critique each other's work before it is submitted. Peer tutors, with coaching from the teacher, can also help students with preliminary drafts. Detailed attention to, and respect for, each person's work helps sustain motivation and validates the increasing knowledge and competence resulting from serious student engagement. The extensive feedback helps students produce more high quality work.

Faculty members at Sewanee spend a lot of time evaluating student work and meeting with students individually to discuss their assessments. Students there report that their teachers value the effort they invest in academic work and encourage improvement in one-on-one conferences. One junior said, "I wrote a paper my first year and the grade was really bad. I just could not understand what I did wrong.... My teacher sat down with me and helped me revise it. Three meetings later I had a great paper. He did not just tell me what to do and how to correct my paper. He invested in me and my work." At California State University at Monterey Bay, about two-thirds of the students live off- campus, so it is difficult to have face-to-face meetings to provide students feedback on their assignments. Faculty members in English and history frequently require students to upload onto Blackboard drafts that are critiqued prior to submitting the final paper.

Questions to Ponder:

Although there is no single blueprint for creating an institution oriented to student success, one essential ingredient is a culture that recognizes, respects, and responds to individual student differences. Here are some questions that can help assess the extent to which such a culture exists on your campus:

1. What recruitment and orientation policies and practices help students begin to identify their learning strengths and educational goals?
2. Are the content and pedagogical approaches used in general education and first-year experience courses appropriate for the different learning styles of your students?
3. Do advisors and course-sequencing work in ways that encourage students to see connections between their various classes, choose a major field, and make good progress to the degree?
4. Are students' products and performances evaluated in ways that deepen student learning? How do you know?
5. Do all students have a culminating experience that contributes to an educationally powerful final year and gets them ready to take the next steps?

Answers to these questions from different types of strong performing institutions around the country are offered in *Student Success in College: Creating Conditions That Matter*. The book features what 20 diverse, educationally effective colleges and universities do to promote student success. The Documenting Effective Educational Practices (DEEP) Project was supported with generous grants from Lumina Foundation for Education and the Center of Inquiry in the Liberal Arts at Wabash College. Altogether, the 24-member research team talked with

more than 2,700 people during its 40 multiple-day site visits to the DEEP schools.

Six properties and conditions shared by the DEEP colleges and universities are discussed in *Student Success in College* along with an array of effective educational policies and practices that, adapted appropriately, can help a campus create and sustain a culture that supports student success. The book can be used in faculty and staff development, strategic planning, institutional mission clarification, leadership development, and collaborative efforts between academic and student affairs. A companion volume, *Assessing Conditions to Enhance Educational Effectiveness: The Inventory for Student Engagement and Success*, will be available in September 2005 and provides a template for institutions to use to identify areas of institutional functioning that can be improved to promote student success.

Sources:

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Project DEEP Colleges and Universities

Alverno College (WI)
California State University at Monterey Bay (CA)
The Evergreen State College (WA)
Fayetteville State University (NC)
George Mason University (VA)
Gonzaga University (WA)
Longwood University (VA)
Macalester College (MN)
Miami University (OH)
Sewanee: University of the South (TN)

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